

PEOPLE VOSE

Obituaries

Robert Vose Jr., 87; patriarch of family that runs art gallery

By Tom Long
GLOBE STAFF

Robert Churchill Vose Jr. of Westwood and Duxbury, the patriarch of the family that owns and operates the Vose Galleries, one of Boston's most enduring art institutions, died Saturday in Massachusetts General Hospital. He was 87.

A leading authority on Colonial portraiture, Mr. Vose was the fourth generation to head the family firm. Friends and colleagues said his eye for people was as good as his eye for paintings, and he enjoyed the human give-and-take of the art business.

In a story published in the Globe on April 19, 1991, Mr. Vose looked back on his career and recalled the time he accidentally discovered a Copley portrait in a third-floor closet of former Massachusetts governor Alvan T. Fuller's summer house in Maine. And the time he found the bottom half of a male nude attributed to Gericault in a warehouse. His grandfather had cut off the bottom before selling the top half. Both halves have now been reunited in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.

Mr. Vose's great-grandfather Joseph Vose — a descendant of Robert Vose, who settled on 600 acres in Milton in 1654 — bought an art supply business in Providence in 1841 that Mr. Vose's grandfather Seth Vose took over at the age of 19. Through agents in Europe he began to import paintings by Corot and other French painters of the Barbizon school. In 1880, he opened a second gallery in Boston, where his clients included Henry Lee Higginson, the founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

When Robert Vose Sr. took over the family business, he added English painters to the firm's offerings and built a four-story gallery in Copley Square. That gallery flourished until the Depression hit. Robert Vose Sr. called on Robert Jr. to leave Harvard College, where he was in his second year, to help in the faltering family business.



ROBERT VOSE JR.

In 1962, Robert Jr. and his brother Mort decided to close the Copley Square gallery and moved to the Vose Galleries' present location on Newbury Street. They discontinued selling contemporary work.

"They said we were betraying the art world," Mr. Vose said in 1991. "But there was nothing more than a little profit and a whole lot of trouble in it."

Vose Galleries has handled an estimated 50,000 works by 1,000 artists, including Rembrandt, Monet, Maxfield Parrish, and John Singleton Copley. Paintings have passed through the gallery that now hang in about 150 American museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

"The fun of it is that you never know from one day to the next what or who is going to come through the door," Mr. Vose said in 1991.

Mr. Vose retired in 1984. The business is now operated by his twin sons, Robert C. III of Boston and Abbot W. of Westwood.

Beside his sons, he leaves a brother, Seth Morton II of Lexington; a sister, Helen Vose Carr of Manchester-by-the-Sea; and two granddaughters.

A memorial service will be held at noon Nov. 7 in the Unitarian-Universalist Church in Duxbury.